

Advent 1A
12-01-13
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of the one God, who was and is and is to come. Amen.

Today we begin a new liturgical year. The Revised Common Lectionary gives it the very imaginative name, "Year A" cycle. While it sounds pretty lifeless, it makes an important point: starting our 'new', liturgical year in November - before the 'old', calendar year has even ended, reminds us that as Christians, we think about the nature and significance of time in our own unique way.

The Godly Play curriculum that we use in Sunday School tells us that *"Everything is changed (since last week)... A King is coming, but he is not the kind of king that people thought was coming. This King had no army, no great house, and no riches. This King was a baby who was born in a barn.*

"The King who was coming is still coming. This is full of mystery. You know, a mystery is hard to enter sometimes. That is why this time of Advent is so important. Sometimes people can walk right through a mystery and not even know it is there. This time of year you will see people hurrying in the malls, buying things and doing this and that, but they will miss the Mystery. They don't know how to get ready - or maybe they just forgot.

"The Church learned a long time ago that people need a way to get ready to enter or even come close to a mystery like Christmas. The Church set aside four weeks to get ready. This is such a great Mystery that it takes that long to get ready. During this time, we are all on the way to Bethlehem. We are all making the journey."

As we get ready to enter the Mystery of Christmas, our journey is not just about back then; it is also about now.

Believers look backwards in celebration of the birth of Jesus. In the present we live in normal *chronos* time - as in chronology - calendar time of days, weeks, months and years. But every now and then, we experience moments of God's special breakthrough in *chronos* called *kairos*. The birth of Jesus was just such a moment. "When the time came," reads Luke 2:6, Mary gave birth not just to any baby boy, but to the "king of the ages" (Rev. 19:3), the lord of all time and history.

But the lessons appointed for today, however, don't point to the nativity at all; instead, they focus on the Second Coming - a future time. "Wake up! Be alert!" Matthew tells us. The day of the Lord is near, and though we cannot know the day or the hour, we must be ready. So we move forward one day at a time, never knowing when God will break through to us, except that it will be in God's own time.

Past, present, future. Time is really a mystery in and of itself.

I am a self-confessed church nerd, in part because of my upbringing as a 'preacher's kid' and in part because I have become a priest, too. As such, I measure time according to the liturgical calendar - today is New Year's Day for church nerds. A church nerd measures her time, not by football and hunting seasons, or by school semesters and vacations, but by Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost - a calendar that has a rhythm all its own.

In our culture we spend time, manage time, save time, waste time, make time and lose time. We even take away an hour and then put it back a few months later!

But in church, we're on God's time, and things are different, especially in Advent. As people of God, we live in between the now and the not yet, which is especially clear in the Advent season. While we spend 99.9% of our time thinking about and anticipating the birth of a child who has already been born, we spend half of the Sundays in Advent talking about the end of time, the date and time of which we

cannot know. And so, while we are being told to keep watch and to be alert, we are also being told to wait! Just wait. It's a mystery.

We know that our culture does not like waiting. We don't like to wait in line. We use debit cards because we don't want people behind us to be impatient while we write checks. We rack up credit card debt because we don't want to wait to save the money for something we want. We yell at our computers when they are 'too slow'. We blow our car horns when people in front of us don't make a fast enough start when the traffic light turns green.

Despite the fact that we don't like to wait, we have to wait a lot, and some of us get to be good at it. We wait for God to hear our prayers for someone who is very ill. We wait for peace - forever, it seems. We wait and wait and wait. And while we are waiting, we can approach it in a couple of ways: we can sit back and expect whatever we are waiting for to be delivered to us, or we can work while we wait - work to help bring about God's kingdom. We do that by speaking words of hope and promise to a world often filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair.

Especially in this season of Advent, we must speak words of hope. We must tell the world that in the midst of darkness, light is about to break in. We must tell them that in the midst of despair, hope will erupt. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. So amid the very real setbacks, disappointments, or worries of this life, we can "keep awake" and "be ready" because we have heard Jesus' promise that our redemption draws near. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

There is an anthem that the choir will sing in a few minutes - it is one of very favorites - that says a lot about the in-between-ness of Advent, of waiting, of hoping, of working to spread that hope, of the fulfillment of the hope. It is called "*E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come*":

Peace be to you and grace from Him
Who freed us from our sins,
Who loved us all and shed His blood
That we might saved be.

Sing Holy, Holy to our Lord,
The Lord, Almighty God,
Who was and is and is to come;
Sing Holy, Holy Lord!

Rejoice in heaven, all ye that dwell therein,
Rejoice on earth, ye saints below,
For Christ is coming, is coming soon,
For Christ is coming soon!

E'en so, Lord Jesus, quickly come,
And night shall be no more;
They need no light nor lamp nor sun,
For Christ will be their All!

Here, this morning, at this banquet table where there is room for everyone, let us
find our hope in the God who made us and loved us and set us free.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.